



Thoughts for 2007 and the future of Aruba prompted by a speech by the Minister of Tourism Edison Briesen

The end of the year is a time when all of us take a moment to examine the events of the past and to contemplate what we would care to see changed or accomplished in the coming year. Even though it is not announced or written down, most of us make New Year's Resolutions, with sincere plans to see them realized.

Not only individuals, but businesses, governments and populations think about what they would like to see come to pass, not only for the institutions they represent, but also for the community of which they are part.

Recently, Aruba celebrated an historic event for the island, the raising of the flag over the Westin Aruba Resort. The resort's owner, local dignitaries and press members, and top executives of Starwood, the owners of the Westin franchise, attended the grand opening of this new four-star resort. Amongst the many speeches that day was one by Aruba's Minister of Tourism and Transport, Edison Briesen. His thoughtful words had impact, and showed he had been seriously thinking about his island, recent events, and a sincere concern for the island's future and prosperity. His wise words could be considered "New Year's Resolutions" for the "island of Aruba," its administrators, and those that wish to share and contribute to its prosperity. THE NEWS considers some of them well worth reprinting for everyone's consideration and benefit.

"Aruba is at a time for unprecedented tourism development across our region ... hotels, ...residences, condominiums, villas and other tourism related infrastructures are emerging. We must therefore capitalize on these opportunities. There is a renewed optimism and enthusiasm, and "do-ability" of deals in countries with a friendly investment climate."

"We cannot continue doing things *today* as we did yesterday, because we will never succeed. Our industry is changing rapidly, before our eyes, with several new dynamics and trends. Tourism is developing and spreading, like wildfire across this region, especially the Caribbean region. The time is now to do things differently, with a feasibility...and to learn from the experts... what makes economic sense, and what is sustainable. We must open our minds to new and innovative ideas, in order to keep our product fresh and competitive."

"Government investment agencies and institutions must recognize that time is money, and there are several other choices available for investment. Our investors must include immediate communities in their development and government plans, otherwise they will result in negative consequences. They must be socially as well as environmentally responsible to insure our natural resources are maintained and protective of our future generations. "

"As a result of this, we at the Minister of Tourism and Transportation as government should rededicate ourselves, refocus our direction and revise our strategy...Our aim should be clear to attract new tourism development projects by highlighting Aruba's tourism industry investment appeal and economic strategies."

"We should consolidate and codify our hotel development policy, and streamline the cumbersome regulatory processes. We need to identify potential development sites and opportunities, create development briefs for each site, and invite proposals for hotel development, community and local...The ministry needs to become a "one stop shop" for developers."

"The demands of guests are different today and we must meet them if we intend to stay in the business called 'Tourism.'"

Tourism is the main industry of Aruba, and all islanders contribute to its success, or detract, even if not directly involved. Arubans have a natural and sincere warmth and sense of hospitality, which has always been the island's premier asset. On the negative side, residents should remember that littering and other negative behavior is harmful to not only the tourist industry, but also the local population, and not only economically. Every one of us, islanders and visitors alike should keep in mind that Aruba is a very small island with a fragile eco-system that needs to be maintained, despite overwhelming development taking place at this time.

Aruba is changing; most of these changes are desirable and beneficial to its economic development, and some are not. Not only government, but also all island residents should be aware, take a hard look at these changes, and consider what it means for the welfare of the community. All island residents, permanent and temporary, should be prepared to “roll up their sleeves” and help with the work that needs to be done to maintain the idyllic life we have known here, to adapt to the changes and progress without losing our “soul.”

“Progress” is inevitable for an island that offers a perfect environment for tourism, and a government that desires the economic benefits of this progress must be prepared to facilitate the industry that feeds it, making it as easy as possible for investors to see their projects completed and maintained. They must also consider in what way these projects will best serve the community, and not a select few, as that is their obligation as elected officials.

Everyone in Aruba has some soul-searching to do with the end of 2006, asking themselves “How can I best serve my island and community?” The answers to these questions are the resolution that we all need to make for 2007 and beyond, if we are to see Aruba maintain its spirit and character, but continue to enter the 21st century.